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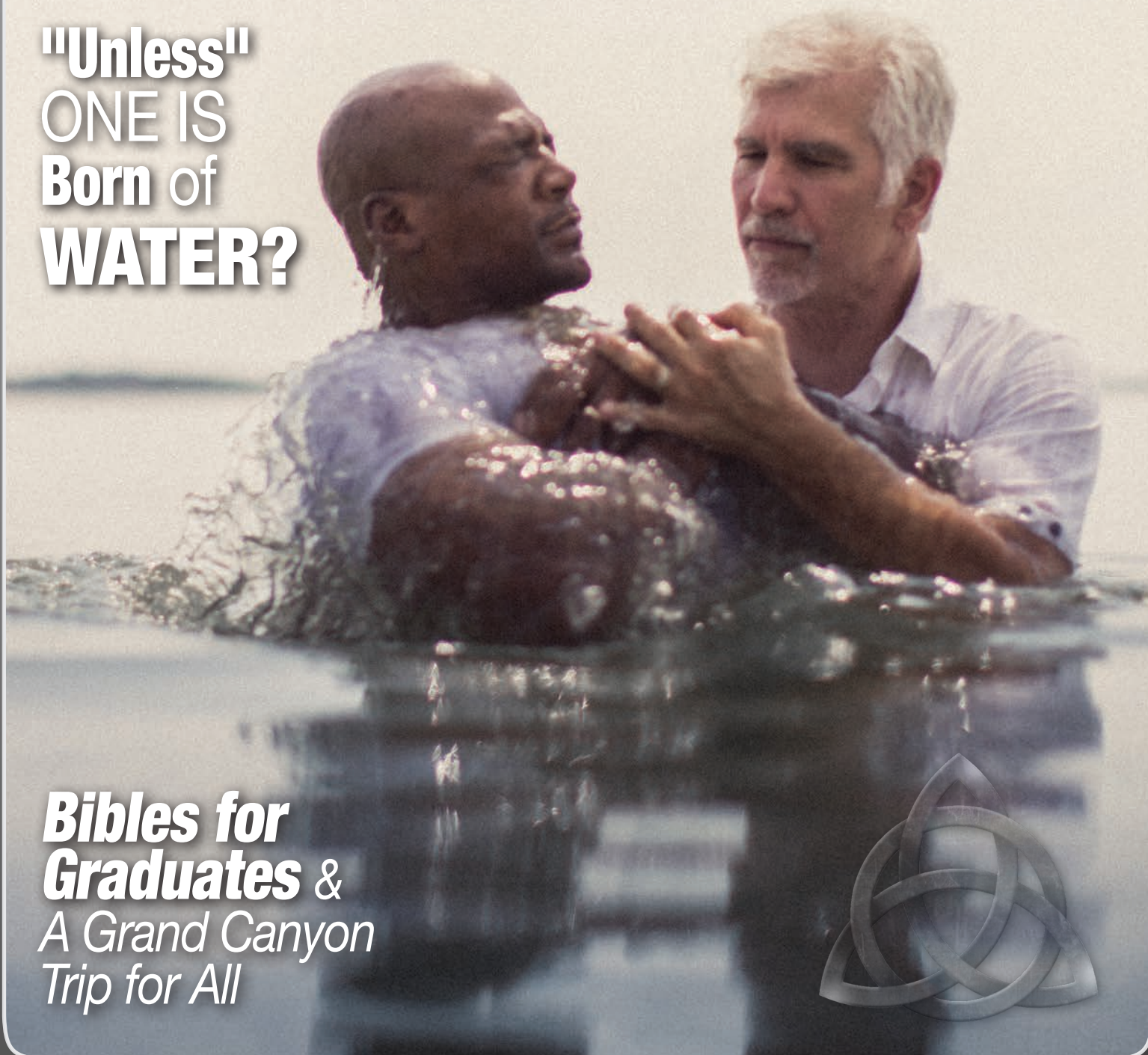
REASON & REVELATION

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Our Triune God

**"Unless"
ONE IS
Born of
WATER?**



***Bibles for
Graduates &
A Grand Canyon
Trip for All***



OUR TRIUNE GOD: ONE in *Substance* and THREE in *Person*

Donnie DeBord, Ph.D.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: The following article was written by A.P. auxiliary writer Dr. Donnie DeBord (Th.M. and Ph.D. in Systematic Theology from Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary). Dr. DeBord is an assistant professor of Systematic Theology and Bible at Freed-Hardeman University and teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on the Trinity.]

THE doctrine of the Trinity remains misunderstood and neglected. Perhaps Christians see Trinitarian theology as impractical, too academic, or perhaps even unnecessary.¹ Fred Sanders described the situation this way: “We tend to acknowledge the doctrine with a polite hospitality but not welcome it with any special warmth.”² How can we believe or preach God’s good news until we know a bit about who God is? In contrast with our contemporary neglect of the Triune God, Paul could not help but praise God as he reflected on how the Father has blessed us through Christ and sealed us with the Spirit, all of which is for the ultimate glory of God (Ephesians 1:3-14).³

Similarly, Peter said the Christian’s life is bound up in the foreknowledge of the Father, sanc-

tification by the Spirit, and obedience to Christ—all due to the sprinkling of Christ’s blood (1 Peter 1:1-2). What some may see as “a dull or peculiar irrelevance turns out to be the source of all that is good in Christianity. Neither a problem nor a technicality, the triune being of God is the vital oxygen of Christian life and joy.”⁴ Just as the cherubim praise the thrice holy God, we too can become better worshipers as we look closer into the nature of God. The best doxologies, Giles Emory said, “do not regard an action of God...but rather they are focused directly on the glory of God and his sanctity. They do not express a wish, but rather they declare the reality of God.”⁵ I think Augustine was right when he said, “This is the fullness of our joy...to enjoy God the Trinity in whose image we have been made.”⁶

When working on my dissertation, I was advised to write an “elevator speech” explanation of what I was working on.⁷ So, how would we do this with the Trinity? It’s hard, but here is how I try to do it: our God exists as three persons who share the same substance.⁸

GOD IS ONE

BEFORE we can appreciate the threeness of God, we must articulate the oneness

of God. There is one God. Moses said, “Hear O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). God alone is God (Psalm 86:10). Besides Him, there is no God (Isaiah 44:6). Zechariah 14:9 confirms: “And the Lord will be King over all the earth; on that day the Lord will be the only one, and His name the only one.” Paul said, “there is no God but one” (1 Corinthians 8:4). God is one, and we are to be singularly devoted to Him. God said, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). The New Testament, even while affirming the deity of Christ and the Spirit, commands Christians to believe in one God (James 2:19; 1 Corinthians 8:6).⁹

While there are three divine persons, each shares in the singular divine substance. They do not each have their own divine substance apart from the other two. That would result in three divine beings—three gods. It is best to see that the Son and Spirit eternally share in the Father’s divine nature. This sharing is without beginning and any diminishment (John 1:1; 5:26; 10:38; 15:26). This precision helps us honor the oneness of God while also maintaining the threeness of God. Matthew Barrett summarized this truth this way: “There is in him no composition, nor can he be compounded by parts. If he could, then he would be a *divided* being (parts are divisible by definition), a *mutable* being (parts are prone to change), a *temporal* being (parts require a composer), and a *dependent* being (depending on these parts as if they precede him).”¹⁰ God’s nature is one in every way. God’s “oneness” is the most extreme unity.

Each Divine Person Is “the LORD”

“The LORD” has been used in Scripture to translate the divine name with which God revealed Himself to Moses. God said He is the “I AM” (Exodus 3:14). God

subsequently revealed His glory to Moses by passing by him and proclaiming His name “I AM” or “the LORD” (Exodus 33:19). God’s name “I AM” or “the LORD” has been understood to communicate God’s aseity (that God exists independent of any cause), uniqueness (holiness), transcendence, and faithfulness. The Bible helps us see that the Father, Son, and Spirit share the same essence by describing each of them as “the LORD.” The New Testament uses the word “Lord” to refer to the Father (Luke 1:32), the Son (Luke 2:11), and the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). This is appropriate because the three share that same divine nature. In the ancient world, to name something was to describe its substance. The Father, Son, and Spirit share in one name (Matthew 28:19).

It would not be appropriate to describe the Father, Son, and Spirit as the great “WE ARE.” “They” are “the I AM” because the three share the same substance. There is only one substance and one divine consciousness shared by three persons. It would be difficult to avoid the charge of polytheism if we believed there were three divine beings with their own divine substances, or three “centers of consciousness,” or a society of divine beings. Instead, God has revealed His nature in the name “I AM.”

There is a novel trinitarian theology labeled social trinitarianism, which teaches that God is three distinct individuals (three beings) rather than the historic position of God as one Being (i.e., substance) shared by three persons. Briefly, social trinitarianism is the idea that each member of the Trinity is fully divine and that the divine persons enjoy a loving relationship with one another as distinct beings.¹¹ Social trinitarianism is defined this way: “Each of the divine persons must have something—be it his own

distinct substance, his own distinct intellect, his own distinct act and faculty of will, or so on—which is his alone, and which the others do not have in the same way.”¹² So, instead of one substance shared by three persons, social trinitarians believe there are three beings who share a set of attributes that make them regarded as gods. There are, it seems, three divine substances. This model sees the Trinity as a family, society, or team. This position is put forward in contrast to the historic model of the Trinity that begins with the oneness of God and proceeds to investigate how the three divine persons share the singular divine substance.

In this social-trinitarian model, the divine persons do not share a singular substance; they each have their own divine substance. This may seem like a small differentiation, but the implications are quite troubling. In this paradigm, it is difficult to explain how there are not three gods. Similarly, in this view, the divine persons are closer to three humans who share in human nature but interact and may have different and/or submissive wills to other members of the divine family.¹³

Social trinitarianism, I believe, should be rejected because the Bible repeatedly affirms the oneness of God rather than three beings who happen to share common attributes belonging to a genus we call god. Furthermore, it seems dangerous to affirm a distinct will and being to each of the divine persons. This would appear to encroach upon the oneness of God.¹⁴ Furthermore, the social trinitarian model is a conspicuous leap from historic trinitarian theology.

So, the Father, Son, and Spirit exist and act with one undivided and inseparable substance. Since the entire Trinity shares the same substance, we know that honor, authority, power, eternity, and mind is

shared by each of the three persons. The Father, Son, and Spirit have no distinction in nature, attitude, or will (John 1:1).

GOD IS THREE

WHY isn’t there just one divine person? Why is there a Trinity? The oneness of God is taught clearly in Scripture and is, perhaps, easier to understand than the threeness of God, but the threeness of God is revealed as well. These are difficult concepts to reconcile. Apart from Scripture, we would have little reason to believe in the threeness or triunity of God. But, as Fred Sanders said, “God made it known that his unity was a triunity precisely when the Father sent the Son and the Holy Spirit in the fulfillment of the promise of redemption.”¹⁵ This Divine Triunity is taught in several ways, but it is beautifully displayed as the Father, Son, and Spirit are routinely placed together as the God who saves. As Michael Horton said, “The confession ‘one God in three persons’ arises naturally out of the triadic formulas in the New Testament in the context of baptism (Mt 28:19 and par.) and liturgical blessings and benedictions (Mt 28:19; Jn 1:18; 5:23; Ro 5:5-8; 1 Co 6:11; 8:6; 12:4-6; 2 Co 13:13-14; Eph 4:4-6; 2 Th 2:13; 1 Ti 2:5, 1 Pe 1:2).”¹⁶

God is eternally one but never lonely or isolated. “God is love” (1 John 4:8,16). This divine love is eternally and perfectly shared between the Father, Son, and Spirit. We see glimpses of this in Scripture as Jesus is described as the Father’s Son and the beloved Son. The Spirit is also described as “the Spirit of God” and “the Spirit of Christ.” Jesus’ pronouncement of the baptismal formula links the three persons to one name. Individuals are baptized “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). Paul’s doxology groups

the three together, saying, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:13). So, the three persons of God are linked together in worship and works of salvation.

The oneness and threeness of God are not math problems to be reconciled or contradictions requiring magical theological maneuvers to maintain the unity of Scripture. The oneness and threeness of God describe two categorically distinct truths: (1) there is one divine substance, and (2) three persons eternally share one divine substance. The oneness and threeness of God are mysteries revealed to us. We should accept them, marvel at them, and investigate these truths as best we can. God’s threeness is revealed to us in Scripture in several different ways. In each of these ways, we can see the one divine essence is shared by the three divine persons.

The One God Who Creates

Scripture opens with the truth that “God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). Even in the Old Testament, we see this creative act involved more than one divine person. Proverbs 8:22-36, for example, was understood by ancient Jews and Christians to refer to a second divine person present at creation. While we may immediately think of God the Father in Genesis 1:1, John taught us the Son was “in the beginning with God” and that “all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:2-3). Furthermore, it is in Christ that “all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17).

Moving forward in the Creation account, we find the Holy Spirit was active in creation as well. The Son was not alone in the work of creation. During the creation of the heavens and earth, “the Spirit

of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2). The phrase “Spirit of God” is found around 24 more times in the Bible, and each time this refers to the Holy Spirit. The words describing the Spirit’s creative work in Genesis 1:2 are echoed in Luke 1:35 to describe the Spirit’s work in the creation of Christ’s human nature. Subsequently, Christians are said to have been born again by “water and the Spirit” (John 3:5; Titus 3:5-6). So, it is right to say God created the heavens and the Earth. We can see this was not an isolated work. Rather, it was the collective work of the Triune God.

God the Son

The Bible also describes the Son’s relationship to the Father in such a way that affirms His deity as well as His distinct personhood. The Son is distinct from the Father but also eternally shares in the divine substance (John 1:1). Jesus calls God His own Father, but Jesus called God His Father differently than we can claim that God is our Father. When Jesus called God Father, He was claiming to be equal with the Father (John 5:18,26). The Son eternally receives His divine life from the Father (John 5:26). The Son is able to bring many sons to glory because He Himself is Son (Galatians 4:4-6).¹⁷ As the divine Son, He is installed as King by the Father and should be worshiped (Psalm 2:2,12; see Acts 4:25-26; Hebrews 1:5; Psalm 45:6-7; Hebrews 1:8-9).

The Gospel of John identified Christ as God by identifying Him with the I AM. The seven main I AM statements (John 6:35; 8:12; 10:9,11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1) and other important I AM constructions (John 4:26; 6:20; 8:18,24,28,58; 13:19; 18:5,8) point to Jesus being the I AM. John’s presentation of Jesus as the “I AM” points his readers back to Exodus 3:14-15 and 33:17-20, where God

reveals His nature in the proclamation of His name “Yahweh,” the great “I AM.”¹⁸

Since there is one divine substance, the Son was able to say, “Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me” (John 14:11). This sharing of the singular divine essence is implied again as Jesus said, “The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own, but the Father, as He remains in Me, does His works” (14:10). The one divine essence is shared by Father, Son, and Spirit in such a way that Jesus can say “I am in the Father and the Father is in Me.” Since He shares the same nature, Jesus was able to say “whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9).

There is an eternal sharing or communication of the divine nature. John described it this way: “we have seen his glory, glory as the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Colossians 1:15 describes Christ as “the image of the invisible God.” Hebrews 1:3 describes the Son as “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.” In this we can imagine the origin of glory and the glory radiating around the original glory. Christ’s Sonship seems to be a shorthand way of teaching that Jesus shares in the Father’s divine nature.¹⁹

Furthermore, Christ demonstrated His divinity (His sharing in the divine nature) as He performed divine works. Christ can forgive sins because He shares in the divine substance (Mark 2:1-12; Matthew 9:5-6). The Word both is God and is with God (John 1:1). In Isaiah 45:23, we learn that every knee should bow, and every tongue confess the LORD. Jesus is able to “explain” the Father because He is “God the only Son, who is in the arms of the Father” (John 1:18, NASB 2020).

Jesus said He would “give life” as a divine work (John 5:21,25). Jesus explained that He is able to give life because the Father has eternally shared His divine life with Him (John 5:26). The Son, because He shares in the singular divine substance, should be honored as the Father is honored (John 5:23). In Philippians 2:10-11, we see that every knee shall bow to Christ who, as Lord, shares in the divine substance. Finally, “perhaps no stronger assertion of Christ’s deity could be made than the announcement given by all of the apostles that there is no other name in heaven or on earth by which we may be saved (John 1:12; Acts 3:16; 4:12; 5:41; Romans 10:13; Philippians 2:9; 1 Peter 4:14; Revelation 2:13). This could mean only that Jesus of Nazareth was none other than Israel’s Great King, Yahweh, whose name alone was to be invoked.”²⁰

God the Spirit

This Spirit is described as “God” (Acts 5:4) and the “Spirit of the Lord” (Acts 5:9). The Spirit was described as God when God’s people sinned against Him (Isaiah 63:10; Matthew 12:31-32; Acts 5:3). The Spirit is grouped with the Father and Son as the three share the one “name” or substance of Matthew 28:19. The Spirit is also included with the Father and Son in texts like 2 Corinthians 13:14 in which Paul prayed, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Spirit be with you all.” The Spirit was present with the Father in Matthew 3:16 to confirm Jesus’ Sonship when He was baptized in the Jordan River.

The deity of the Spirit is demonstrated in the Spirit’s involvement in work only God can do. This exclusively divine activity is seen in the Spirit’s eternal pre-existence and work to bring about creation (Genesis 1:2) and the regeneration

of God’s people (John 3:3-5; Titus 3:5-7). The Spirit is omnipresent (Psalm 139:7-10). The Spirit is omniscient (Isaiah 40:13-14). The Spirit reveals the future (1 Timothy 4:1). The Spirit was described by the Son as “another Helper” and “the Spirit of Truth” to be with the Apostles instead of the incarnate Christ (John 14:16-18). God’s love is “poured into our hearts” through the Spirit (Romans 5:5). The Spirit, as a divine work, sanctifies God’s people (1 Peter 1:2). Christians are the “temple of God” because God’s Spirit dwells within them (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19).

The deity of the Spirit is also seen in the works of the Spirit during the incarnation of Christ. This divine work was prophesied in Isaiah 42:1-14 as God revealed that His Spirit would rest upon His chosen Servant. The Spirit, as a divine person, created the human nature of Christ in Mary’s womb (Luke 1:35; Matthew 1:18). Jesus’ miraculous work was completed through the Spirit’s direction and empowerment (John 3:34; Matthew 12:28). Finally, the Spirit is also said to have raised Christ’s body from the dead (Romans 8:11).²¹

CONCLUSION

The oneness and threeness of God demonstrate God’s perfection. Instead of isolation or loneliness, our triune God eternally enjoys

His divine fullness. The three persons of God also remind us of our own Christian certainty. The Father, Son, and Spirit share their overflowing love with us and exalt us for their own glory. The triune God is our great comfort in every situation in life. We can know the Father, Son, and Spirit are at work to bring us home.

So, how do we speak of God appropriately? Speak of God as He has revealed Himself. This self-revelation of God from God is accommodative—it is as much as we can handle, but it is also accurate. We can know God as the one God who exists as God the Father, the Son of God, and the Spirit of God. The Father, Son, and Spirit are the three persons who share the same divine substance.

Our affections and worship should be singularly focused on God. And, as we focus on the oneness of God, we are also compelled to consider the three persons of God. We can agree with Gregory of Nazianzus, who said, “No sooner do I conceive of the one than I am illumined by the splendor of the three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the one.”²² Indeed, there is one divine essence. We have our hope in the one God, Who, through actions appropriate to the three persons, saved us and brought us to Himself for our salvation and His glory. (cont. on p. 8)

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Editor & Associate Editor:

Eric Lyons, M.Min.

Jeff Miller, M.S., Ph.D.*

(*Biomechanical Engineering, Auburn University)

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ And sadly, some consider the concept self-contradictory, rejecting altogether the reality of the triune God.
- ² Fred Sanders (2017), *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway), second edition, p. 13.
- ³ All Scripture references are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.
- ⁴ Michael Reeves (2012), *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic), p. 18.
- ⁵ Gilles Emery (2011), *The Trinity: An Introduction to Catholic Doctrine on the Triune God*, Thomistic Ressourcement Book 1 (The Catholic University of America Press), p. 6.
- ⁶ Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 1.8.18.
- ⁷ An elevator speech is a brief explanation of what you are studying.
- ⁸ John Frame explained “substance” this way: “Substance means something like ‘what he really is.’ So, the Father really is God, the Son really is God, and the Spirit really is God. Or you can think of the one substance as the ‘Godness of God.’ All three persons have that Godness” [John Frame (2006), *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R), p. 35].
- ⁹ John Owen said, “Hence it follows, that when the Scripture revealeth the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost to be one God, seeing it necessarily and unavoidably follows thereon that they are one in essence (wherein alone it is possible they can be one), and three in their distinct subsistences (wherein alone it is possible they can be three),—this is no less of divine revelation than the first principle from whence these things follow” [*The Works of John Owen* (n.d.), ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: T&T Clark), p. 379].
- ¹⁰ Matthew Barrett (2021), *Simply Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker), p. 137.
- ¹¹ This theology begins with a combination of several post-Enlightenment ideas. First, the idea has roots in Hegelian philosophy, as it sees the basic distinction in ultimate reality as the Father/Son distinction rather than the Creator/creature distinction. Then there is the acceptance of the Schleiermachian idea that the Old Testament writings had to be against the polytheistic pagan deities, but now that the pagan deities are no longer heavily worshiped the plurality of God can be freely expounded. Finally, the influence of modernity’s emphasis on personality and relationship combines with Hegel and Schleiermacher to provide a brand-new way of looking at the Trinity. This model has three persons who choose to love each other and work together, but they are three different “people” just as you and I are different people. This novel view is popular, but it does not present God as one.
- ¹² Michael Joseph Higgins (2023), “Simply Given: Self-Gift and Consubstantiality in Aquinas and Social Trinitarianism,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, p. 3.
- ¹³ This description is, admittedly, brief and overgeneralizing. For a better introductory description of the position, see “The Perfect Family: Our Model for Life Together Is Found in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (1988) by Cornelius Plantinga in *Christianity Today*, March 4.
- ¹⁴ For more thorough responses to social trinitarianism, see chapters 8 and 9 of Stephen Holmes (2012) *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History, and Modernity* (Downers: IVP Academic) and Matthew Barrett (2021), *Simply Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker).
- ¹⁵ Fred Sanders (2016), *The Triune God* in *New Studies in Dogmatics*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott Swain (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), p. 37.
- ¹⁶ Michael Horton (2011), *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), p. 274.
- ¹⁷ “Son” or “Son of God” can refer to Adam, Israel, or the installation of a king by his father. The Bible also uses the word Son to refer specifically to the relationship between Father and Son. This shared relationship is built on their shared nature. “Son” or “sonship” can focus on a declaration of kingship or enthronement. While there are passages in which this ancient Near Eastern meaning is applied to the Son, it is also true that Sonship is a way in which Jesus affirmed His eternal equality with the Father. This is clear in John 5:17-18 and Hebrews 1. For a healthy discussion of Jesus as Son, see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:274-275 and R.B. Jamieson (2021), *The Paradox of Sonship: Christology in the Epistle to the Hebrews* in *Studies in Christian Doctrine and Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; An Imprint of InterVarsity Press).
- ¹⁸ Keown said, “John does not use the construct neutrally or merely as an identification device. Most likely, they point to Jesus’ divinity in terms of Exodus 3:14 (LXX): ‘I am the one who is’ (*egō eimi ho ōn*). It also calls to mind Isaiah 40-55 where ‘I am’ is used as a title for God (Isa 43:10,25; 45:18; 46:4; 51:12; 52:6). This is confirmed by the Jews’ response; they recognized it as a radical claim to divinity and sought to kill him (John 5:18; 8:59; 10:33)” [Mark J. Keown (2018), *Discovering the New Testament: An Introduction to Its Background, Theology, and Themes: The Gospels & Acts* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press), 1:291].
- ¹⁹ This sharing in one divine substance is especially clear in 1 Corinthians 8:6 as Paul said, “Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” Bible readers are accustomed to reading “Lord” as a reference to God in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the word “Lord” refers overwhelmingly to the Son rather than the Father.
- ²⁰ Michael Horton (2011), *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), pp. 276-277.
- ²¹ Interestingly, the resurrection is also attributed to God’s work (Romans 6:4; Acts 2:32). Jesus said He laid down His own life so that He could “take it up again” (John 10:18, cf. John 2:18). Galatians 1:1 attributes the resurrection of Christ to the Father. So, who raised Jesus? The resurrection of Christ leads us to accept what is called “the doctrine of inseparable operations.” This just means that since the three divine persons share one divine nature, each person of God is involved in the works which are only appropriate for the individual persons. Only the Son of God could make us to be the sons and daughters of God. This work is especially appropriate for Him as Son. The Spirit is involved in this work, and the Father is involved in this work, but the Christian’s adoption to sonship is through the Son Who worked by the Spirit at the Father’s direction. The three persons of God share one divine essence, but there are three persons who operate as is fitting for each of them based on their eternal divine relations. This helps us understand a bit better how “through Him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Ephesians 2:18).
- ²² Gregory Nazianzen, *Orations*, 40.41.

"UNLESS" One Is Born of WATER?

Dave Miller, Ph.D.

MUCH of Christendom rejects the act of baptism as being of essential significance. Water baptism is typically viewed as a symbolic ritual that a person ought to engage in after accepting Jesus to become a Christian—but the act is not essential to salvation. Hence, water immersion is not generally considered to be a **prerequisite** to the forgiveness of sin. However, in Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus, His language suggests otherwise. He used an exceptive statement when He declared to Nicodemus: "Most assuredly, I say to you, **unless** one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Whereas older versions rendered the underlying Greek with the word "except" (e.g., ASV, KJV), newer translations generally use the word "unless." The underlying Greek expression is ἐὰν μὴ (pronounced *ay-on, may*). A perusal of its use in the New Testament quickly reveals that the **logi-**

cal force of the expression is "if and only if."

Logicians, philosophers, and mathematicians define "if and only if" as a "biconditional logical connective between statements" and, therefore, a statement of material equivalence.¹ So an "if and only if" statement indicates a **necessary and sufficient condition**. The logical force of Jesus' use of "unless" is that I will enter the kingdom **if and only if** I am born of water and the Spirit. As an example, the statement "Unless the fruit is a banana, I cannot eat it" is logically equivalent to "I can eat fruit **if and only if** the fruit is a banana," which is also logically equivalent to saying, "I can eat the fruit if the fruit is a banana, and I can eat no other fruit."

Observe that in an exceptive clause, when a single condition is specified, it constitutes the one and only means by which the stated goal may be achieved. Respected Greek grammarian A.T. Robertson gives examples of this construction under his discussion of four classes of the conditional sentence.² Consider the following 10 instances:

1. Matthew 26:42—"Again, a second time, He went away and prayed, saying, 'O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me **unless** I drink it, Your will be done.'"

Logical Force: The "cup" of crucifixion could be achieved **if and only if** Jesus "drank" it, i.e., endured it.

2. Mark 3:27—"No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, **unless** he first binds the strong man. And then he will plunder his house."

Logical Force: A strong man's house can be entered and plundered **if and only if** the strong man is first bound.

3. Mark 4:22—"For there is nothing hidden which will not be revealed, nor has anything been kept secret **but that** it should come to light."

Logical Force: Things were kept secret **if and only if** they would later be divulged.

4. John 3:27—"John answered and said, 'A man can receive nothing **unless** it has been given to him from heaven.'"

Logical Force: A man can receive divine information from heaven **if and only if** God wills/ allows it.

5. John 10:37—"If I do **not** do the works of My Father, do not believe Me."

Logical Force: Believe Me **if and only if** I perform miraculous works of God.

6. John 15:6—"If anyone does **not** abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned."

Logical Force: A person can avoid hell **if and only if** he abides in Christ.

7. John 16:7—"It is to your advantage that I go away; for **if** I do **not** go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you."

Logical Force: The Helper would come to the apostles **if and only if** Jesus went away.

8. 1 Corinthians 9:16—"For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid

Water immersion is the one and only entrance into the kingdom of Christ.

upon me; yes, woe is me **if** I do **not** preach the gospel!”

Logical Force: Paul could avoid woe **if and only if** he preached the Gospel.

9. 2 Timothy 2:5—“And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned **unless** he competes according to the rules.”

Logical Force: An athlete is crowned **if and only if** he competes according to the rules.

10. Revelation 2:22—“Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, **unless** they repent of their deeds.”

Logical Force: Jezebel could avoid a sickbed and tribulation **if and only if** she repented of her deeds.

Consider three additional biblical illustrations of this grammatical principle:³

Luke 10:6—“And if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest on it; **if not**, it will return to you.”

Logical Force: Your peace will return to you **if and only if** a son of peace is in the house.

Luke 13:9—“And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.”

Logical Force: Cut it down **if and only if** it does not bear fruit.

Revelation 2:5—“Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—**unless** you repent.”

Logical Force: The Ephesian Christians could avoid the removal of their lampstand **if and only if** they repented.

Observe that in each of these cases, the logical force of the underlying Greek is “if and only if.” **Only on the sole grounds of the stated condition may the action be accomplished or avoided.** Whatever other stipulations/prerequisites are given that may be equally essential

(e.g., believe), nevertheless, the use of εἰ μὴ demands that the condition stipulated by the exceptive clause be met.

John 3:5

The application of this grammatical principle to John 3:5 lies in the words selected by Jesus to clarify for Nicodemus the only way to achieve the new birth: “Jesus answered, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, **unless** one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.’” Jesus’ use of “unless” implies the following logically equivalent statements:

All those born of water and Spirit may enter the kingdom.

No persons not born of water and Spirit may enter the kingdom.

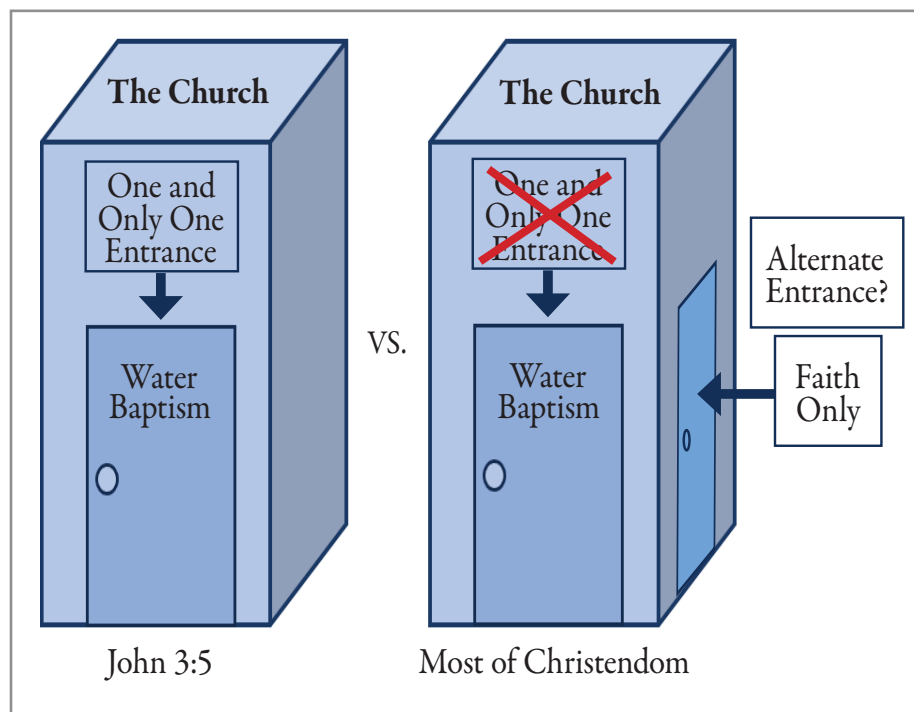
All persons not born of water and Spirit are persons who may not enter the kingdom.

No persons not born of water and Spirit may enter the kingdom.⁴

A person may enter the kingdom of God **if and only if** he is born of water and the spirit. There are no other/additional ways by which

one might enter the kingdom. Jesus’ use of the word “water” is an unmistakable reference to water baptism.⁵ Hence, a person may enter into the kingdom of God **if and only if** he is baptized in water. Consider the graphics below.

Notice that the logical force of “unless” necessitates that water immersion is the one and only entrance into the kingdom of Christ. Other alleged entrances into the kingdom—whether “faith only,” “accept Jesus as your Savior,” “the sinner’s prayer,” “just believe,” or predestination—are ineffectual. While faith, repentance, and oral confession all **precede** salvation,⁶ the “doorway” or entrance point into the kingdom is water baptism. Water baptism constitutes the actual threshold that enables the unforgiven individual to pass into the kingdom of Christ. Baptism is the “dividing line” between the world and the kingdom. No wonder Jesus proclaimed: “He who believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:16). No wonder Ananias announced to Paul: “Now why do



you delay? Get up and be baptized, and **wash away your sins**, calling on His name” (Acts 22:16, NASB). No wonder Paul declared: “For by one Spirit we were all **baptized into one body**” (1 Corinthians 12:13). And no wonder Peter declared: “**baptism now saves you**...through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:21, NASB).⁷

ENDNOTES

- ¹ See, for example, university math professor Bruce Ikenaga’s discussion at: <https://sites.millersville.edu/bikenaga/math-proof/logical-connectives/logical-connectives.html>; also I.M. Copi, C. Cohen, D.E. Flage (2006). *Essentials of Logic* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, second edition), p. 197; UHM university professor Tom Ramsey, “If and Only If,” <https://www.math.hawaii.edu/~ramsey/Logic/Iff.html>; Rudolf Carnap (1958), *Introduction to Symbolic Logic and Its Applications* (New York: Dover), p. 8; E. Mendelson (1997), *Introduction to Mathematical Logic*, 4th edition (London: Chapman & Hall), p. 14. See also Irving Copi (1972), *Introduction to Logic* (New York: Macmillan), p. 343—“exceptive propositions are most conveniently regarded as quantified biconditionals.”
- ² A.T. Robertson (1934), *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press), pp. 1004ff.
- ³ F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and Robert Funk (1961), *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), p. 254.
- ⁴ For further discussion of the logical import of exceptive statements, see Lionel Ruby (1950), *Logic: An Introduction* (Chicago, IL: J.B. Lippincott), pp. 208,270; Virginia Klenk (1983), *Understanding Symbolic Logic* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall), pp. 350-353; Robert Sharvy (1977), *Logic: An Outline* (Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams, & Co.), p. 38; Norman Geisler and Ronald Brooks (1990), *Come, Let Us Reason* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker), p. 126; Robert Baum (1975), *Logic* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston), p. 55.
- ⁵ Some have suggested that “water” is being used figuratively to refer to the Holy Spirit. At least three contextual

indicators suggest otherwise: (1) The word “water” is used again in the same context (18 verses later) with an obvious literal import: “Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much **water** there. And they came and were **baptized**” (John 3:23); (2) If “water” in John 3:5 refers to the Spirit, then the sentence becomes nonsensical: “unless one is born of the Spirit and the Spirit....” (3) John alludes to a remark of Jesus in 7:38 in which “water” is used figuratively for the Holy Spirit’s impending role once the New Testament Era commenced—a role which Jesus elaborated on in chapters 13-17 which would pertain to the apostolic role in the establishment and spread of the Kingdom. Observe, however, that John had to provide an explanatory remark in order to clarify the fact. The New Testament consistently represents water immersion—literal H₂O—as integral to God’s plan of salvation: Matthew 3:11,16; Mark 1:8,10; Luke 3:16; John 1:26,31,33; Acts 8:36,38,39; 10:47; Ephesians 5:26; 1 Peter 3:20-21. No wonder when it became evident to those assembled that Gentiles had the right to be saved and become Christians, Peter issued a rhetorical question: “Can anyone forbid **water**, that these should not be baptized...? And he **commanded** them to be baptized” (Acts 10:47-48).

⁶ e.g., Romans 10:17; Acts 2:38; Romans 10:9-10.

⁷ Of course, water has no saving power. Rather, the Bible teaches that God for-

gives a person based solely on the blood of Jesus. The question is not **how** God saves, but **when**. The New Testament plainly teaches that God forgives sin based on Christ’s blood when the penitent, confessing believer submits to water immersion. See Dave Miller (2019), *Baptism & the Greek Made Simple* (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics Press). Also Dave Miller (2021), “Does the Water Regenerate?” *Reason & Revelation*, 41[11]:131, November, <https://apologeticspress.org/does-the-water-regenerate/>. Some have argued that “water” in John 3:5 refers to Christ’s blood or to the amniotic fluid that accompanies the physical birth of a child. For a response to these claims, see Dave Miller (2005), “Baptism and the New Birth,” <https://apologeticspress.org/baptism-and-the-new-birth-1516/>. For further study, see *Receiving the Gift of Salvation*, <https://apologeticspress.org/issue/receiving-the-gift-of-salvation/>.



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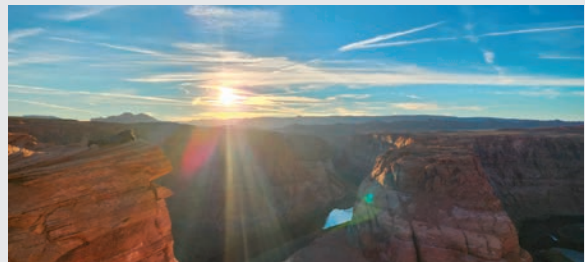
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**NOTE FROM***The Editor***Bibles for Graduates...and a Grand Canyon Trip for All**

High school and college graduations are just around the corner. Have you given much thought to what you will give to those near and dear to you to celebrate their perseverance and accomplishments in school? Perhaps you are thinking of giving them money. Or you may be considering getting them gift cards to their favorite fast-food restaurants. May we humbly (and yet enthusiastically) recommend that you consider purchasing them something far more valuable, such as the *AP Defending the Faith Study Bible*? One college student carrying this Bible on a university campus recently told a friend of mine (who recognized it) that he received the AP study Bible after high school graduation, and it was “the best graduate present” he received. Perhaps some 18 or 22-year-old in your sphere of influence would be eternally benefited by such a gift?

Switching gears...for several years now, AP has had a steady stream of requests that we lead tours at beautiful natural sites and museums, giving inquiring minds the proper biblical interpretation of the formations and evidences presented at those locations. This summer (June 29-July 3), AP scientist Dr. Jeff Miller is planning to do just that, leading Creation enthusi-



asts systematically through the Flood as they visit iconic Flood-related locations in northern Arizona—perhaps the best place on Earth to witness the effects of that great biblical event.

Explorers will journey with Dr. Jeff as he leads them into the pre-Flood Petrified Forest, Painted Desert, Meteor Crater, S P Crater Volcano, Lowell Observatory (where Pluto was discovered), Wupatki National Monument, Lava River Cave, and, as a finale, the Grand Canyon. What better way to learn about the greatest work the Lord did to the Earth than an immersive experience with an expert on the subject? Space is limited, so sign up today! Contact Jeff Miller for more information: jeff@apologeticspress.org.

Eric Lyons

See Center Spread for More Details